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ABSTRACT

In the hope that students would develop authority in their writing, they were instructed to write a personal essay about themselves. Most of the essays, however, were mediocre and formulaic. While one student's experience of the painful loss of his mother to cancer was tragic, his essay was cliched. Supporters of the use of personal essay in first-year composition believe that autobiography helps students to situate themselves within a larger cultural context and thus be more aware of and able to critique that context. Critics, however, are most often concerned about students being revictimized by being forced to reveal painful experiences in English classes. Often students' prose is more lucid when writing autobiography, but that does not necessarily lead to their writing better analytical, academic prose. One of the biggest problems with the autobiographical assignment is the assessment of these essays. The easiest to assess is the preliminary autobiographical assignment which can be given an old-fashioned "check" or "check plus." Another option is to grade the essay as part of a portfolio so that it is seen as a part of a larger effort, or not to grade it at all. (Contains 14 references; a personal essay survey is appended.) (CR)

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ED 414 581

Your Life is a C+: Assigning and Assessing the Personal Essay in First Year Composition

During my first semester of teaching, I, optimistically, assigned a personal essay hoping it would help my students to develop authority in their writing by enabling them to write about a subject upon which they *are* an authority: themselves. My assignment was simple: write an essay about some major realization or decision. We had been reading autobiographical pieces that focused on, and analyzed, a pivotal moment in the author's life that had not only personal importance, but national, even global, resonance. I wanted them to try to do the same. The results were not nearly what I had hoped they would be. Most of the essays were still mediocre and formulaic. One student was completely paralyzed. He claimed that had never made any realizations or decisions. He could not write about himself. Similarly, I was paralyzed by another student's essay about his realization of the fragility of life during the slow, painful loss of his mother to cancer. His experience was tragic, his essay cliché. I could not grade either paper. I decided not to grade any of the papers, but I found it was difficult even to comment. Students were not able to write comfortably and I was not able to assess what they did write. How could I make it clear to these students that I was not commenting on their lives, but on their writing?

Upon reflection, I wondered if we can even make that separation, which is really a separation of form from content. Many would argue, myself included, that we can't really divorce the personal from our perceptions and arguments, or for that matter from our assignments and assessments, however we try to conceal it. In this paper, I will look at a few theories behind personal/autobiographical essay assignments, the assignments themselves, and the assessment of these assignments. My sources are from books and articles as well as a survey I distributed to the writing instructors at my university (Appendix A). In my brief, and by no

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means comprehensive, exploration, I found that the theories, the assignments, and their consequent assessment resist, even contradict, one another, creating a confusion that is rooted in conceptions of just what the goal of composition, or, for that matter, the goal of a college education, is thought to be.

Part of the problem is just what is meant by the terms "personal" or "autobiographical.". I've been using the terms interchangably as they do seem to collapse in much of the literature, but they are really not interchangeable. In "Essayists on the Essay" Carl Klaus argues that the essay is for inquiry or exploration, not argument, explanation or persuasion. In this case then, albeit reductively, the personal essay is characterized by inquiry, autobiography by narrative, and composition, I suppose, by argument. I think the problems with such stringent categorizations are apparent in and of themselves. What do you call a piece, such as Zora Neal Hurston's "How it feels to be colored me" which has all three? The best writing usually weaves all rhetorical categories; thus, perhaps, for the purpose of looking at these assignments, it would be better to categorize them as either purely autobiographical, meaning based exclusively on the writer's life, or what Gordon Harvey has termed the personal/textual which elicits some response from a writer combining a text(s) with his life.

The form most consistently attacked by critics of the personal essay assignment is that of straightforward (or pure) autobiography. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler question the ethics of asking students to reveal themselves and their experiences in English classes. They are concerned about students being revictimized by being forced to reveal these experiences, particularly female and minority students (B2). This is echoed in one of the responses to my survey, which suggests the classroom is not the place for personal revelation: "We're teachers, not psychologists." The implication then is that the purpose of the composition course is to teach form and critical thinking, but only regarding issues that are safely public. The difficulty with such an implication is that not only does it exacerbate the split between the public and the private, but assumes a

consensus about just what is considered public and such consensus is highly debatable. In the realm of ethics especially, the separation of the public from the private seems impossible.

In addition to these ethical problems, other critics argue that such straightforward autobiographical writing does not necessarily translate into better writing or critical thinking. Citing James Britton, Jeanette Harris writes that although his study convinced him and others of the benefits of personal writing, their study does not confirm this assumption (173). Rather, she suggests that this belief has been intuitive. Gordon Harvey argues that often personal essay assignments are proposals which "seem most interested in bringing autobiography into cultural theorizing, *not* into the kind of close analysis of primary texts that freshmen need to learn and this is much harder to interrupt or contextualize with personal report" (644). The result often leads to fractured essays with some theory and some personal experience, though not necessarily a relationship between the two or with large cultural generalizations "proven" by personal experience rather than analysis. Thus, basically, the critiques of the use of the personal essay in first year composition fall into either concern over ethics or concern over form.

The expansion of form is the basis for the theories of many of the proponents of the personal essay. A more open form that stimulates such inquiry as described by Klaus is what instructors, such as Kurt Spellmeyer and William Zeiger, want to encourage in their students. Zeiger calls for the need of the personal essay in the vein of Montaigne, Loren Eisley, and Annie Dillard because of the overemphasis in the contemporary composition class on exposition and argument: "To 'prove' an assertion today is to win undisputed acceptance for it--to stop inquiry rather than start it" (456). Rather he argues that "if we genuinely wish to promote freedom of thought, to balance demonstration with the inquiry which sustains it, then we must establish the art of exploration as an equally acceptable and worthy pursuit" (459). In addition to a more open form, other supporters of the personal essay propose that such assignments empower the students. One instructor surveyed wrote: "I thought that being able write about something they were completely familiar with would give them enough confidence and authority to begin speaking out." Further, supporters have also argued that autobiography helps students to situate

themselves within a larger cultural context and, thus, be more aware of, and able to critique, that context. Mary Jane Dickerson firmly advocates using the personal/autobiographical essay: "Autobiography's origin as narrative that arises from a dialogue with the self and about the self in relation to others " grants it a unique critical perspective (137)[1]. All of these theories are quite encouraging and inviting, but as is all too often the case with theories, unfortunately, their application in the classroom is difficult and problematic.

In addition to the concerns raised by the opponents of the autobiographical essay, many of the proposed theoretical benefits of the theories are not reflected in many of the assignments I surveyed. Many of the assignments can also be categorized roughly as either pure autobiography or personal/textual. Very few assignments are purely autobiographical. The first type of such an assignment is that of the undirected, purely autobiographical essay, which reflects what Wendall Harris would agree is the true personal essay motivated by a desire for inquiry rather than an assignment (939). This is not an assignment I came across in the anthologies. Rather, I have received this one myself. The second type of assignment is the directed, purely autobiographical essay, as is exemplified by assignments. An example is this assignment from the *Brief Bedford Reader* listed as an option in response to a selection from Maya Angelou asking the student to "write an essay based on some childhood experience of [their] own, still vivid in [their] memory" (507). Besides being incredibly vague, this type of response does not require any engagement with text, an engagement which is often considered crucial to critical thinking and critical writing. Such dominantly autobiographical assignments are the ones most severely criticized by opponents of the personal essay, such as Swartzlander, Lee, and Stamler for ethical reasons. Such assignments are also criticized because there is little evidence that they lead to more critical thinking or to better writing. Often students' prose is more lucid when writing autobiography, but that does not necessarily lead to students writing better analytical, academic prose.

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[1]Dickerson specifies throughout her essay that autobiographical essay assignments are particularly useful in advanced composition courses, though she never really says why. Yet, in her last paragraph, she advocates using them in both advanced classes and first year courses (150).

The far more common type of autobiographical assignment is what Harvey has called the personal/textual assignment. The first common variation of this assignment is one in which the student is to relate a personal experience to one as found in a particular text. The following is an example of such an assignment from *The Presence of Others: Voices that Call for Response*. In response to a selection from Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, students were asked:

> Try to remember a time when your relationship with someone (teacher, parent, coach, religious leader) made it easier (or harder) for you to learn what that person was trying to teach you. Write a brief description of this event for your class, concluding by summarizing those things about another person that most *help* you to learn from him or her. (111)

Yet another variation of the personal/textual assignment asks the student to try to fit a text into their life, such as this one from *The Millenium Reader*: "Compare Dillard's experience of adolescence with your own. How were they different, and in what ways were they similar?" (152). Keeping in mind the said goals of the personal essay (such as empowerment, open form, inquiry, development of voice) aspects of these assignments do not seem to fit. First, rather than an open form, many suggest rather rigid structures, such as the assignment in response to *Lives on the Boundary*. Further, some of these personal/textual assignments, such as in the assignment responding to Annie Dillard, may, as Gordon Harvey has suggested, encourage fragmented papers. An example might be a essay in which experience is paralleled such as Annie Dillard couldn't stop laughing in class and I couldn't stop laughing in class, but no real connection between the two stories. Although such writing does make connections, it is not necessarily critical. Perhaps even more problematic is that students may simplify an author's argument in order to make these connections, as Harvey states: "The students devote their energy to finding whatever personal connections they can, not to wrestling the issues out of the text" (645). Or worse, Harvey again: "The personal/textual essay assignment may reduce students' intimidation in the face of texts, but it exaggerates another tendency among students to find themselves and

their values too quickly and simplistically reflected in whatever they read" (646). Thus, perhaps such empowerment risks reductive readings.

A third variation of the personal/textual assignmetn is that of applying an author's model or argument to the student's life, as in this assignment from *Ways of Reading* based on a selection from Walker Percy. The student is to tell a story of his own which has been suggested by Percy's stories, but to tell that story looking back at his "own experience through the lens of 'The Loss of the Creature,' noticing what Percy would notice and following the paths that he would find interesting"(525). The student is even to "try to bring the terms that Percy uses--like 'sovereign,' 'consumer,' 'expert,' and 'dialectic'--to bear on the story" he has to tell (525). A similiar variation on this type of assignment is that in which the student is asked to mimic or imitate a particular personal/autobiographical essay. Examples of such assignmens are also found in *Ways of Reading*. Please forgive the length of the quotation, but the explanation of the assignment seems integral to understanding how autobiographical writing is to be used in this assignment. David Bartholmae and Anthony Petrotsky preface their autobiographical sequences with the following explanation:

> The first four assignments ask you to write from within the example of some of the most distinctive and influential writers of our time. . . . One of the difficulties, for a student, of an extended project like this is finding a way of writing differently. An autobiographical project *without* the reading (where, in a sense, you were writing on your own) might well produce each week only more of the same, the same story written in the same style. Our goal is to make you aware of the options available to you as a writer as you think about, write, and represent your life. You should think of these assignments as asking not for mere or mechanical imitation, but as invitations to think about areas of your life as these authors have and to imagine the problems and potential of life-writing through the example of their prose, its style and methods. (778)

Here is an actual assignment:

> Once you have developed a sense of Ellison's method, write an autobiographical exploration of your own, one that has the rhythm and the moves, the shape and the design of 'An Extravagance of Laughter.' As far as subject matter is concerned, let Ellison's text stand as an invitation (inviting you to write about race or difference or region or travel or difficult moments), but don't feel compelled to follow his lead. You can write about anything you want (but you would be wise, we've learned, to stay away from childhood experiences and to stick with more adult experiences). The key is to follow the essay as an example of a *way* of writing - - moving slowly, turning this way and that, combining stories and reflection, working outside of more predictable forms -- either straightforward chronological narrative (first this, then that) or a rigid structure of thesis and proof. (778)

To their credit Bartholomae and Petrotsky explain the theory behind the assignment to the students. Yet, I still question the 'personalness' of these personal essay assignments, its supposed empowerment and voice strengthening. Although Bartholomae and Petrotsky justify imitation by claiming that it encourages "writing differently," I question how mimicking an author encourages a student's development. Such imitation, especially in an assignment like the one on Ralph Ellison in which the student is even to mimic his rhythm, privileges the author, the author's perspective, even the author's experience over that of the student. It implies these experiences are the ones that are important and these ways of writing about them are important, not the ones you may choose to write about. Contrary to their advice, at seventeen, what can you write about except childhood? Also, though the student may be experimenting with form, it is still not the sort of 'organic' form discovered by the writer himself that would seem to me to be the point of exploratory inquiry; it is mimicry.

Finally, as I've stated, one of the biggest problems with the autobiographical assignment is that of the assessment of these essays. This issue is not addressed in much of the criticism on the personal essay (authors refer to it in passing, but not in great detail); nevertheless, I think it is a problem unique to the personal essay. You may emphasize to students that you are not grading their lives, but their writing. Yet, how do you do it? Even if we can make the separation, how do

we neutralize our own reactions so that we don't encourage Hard Copy style sensationalism in their essays. As Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler point out: "Theoretically, it may be true that students have options about what they choose to reveal, but the students we have talked to believe that the papers that receive the highest grades are those detailing highly emotional events or those that display the most drama" (B1). Perhaps the student's background has been very limited and their life sheltered. I was shocked recently to find that in a class of only 15 students, 3 of them had never seen a homeless person. Was I then to be surprised by their stock, privledged descriptions of homeless people which they had never experienced except on T.V? Are we to judge them because a sheltered life has not yet led them to think beyond their lives? In response to these ethical concerns, Mary Goldschimdt argues that it helps if we create assignments which ask students to create rather than to reveal (101) and Jeanette Harris asks that we encourage students to share experiences rather than reveal their feelings (172). Although these distinctions are enticing, I'm not sure 'feelings' can be separated from 'experiences'; nor do I understand how assignments which encourage students to create really avoid revelation.

It is even more difficult to separate our own expectations and assumptions, which arebased on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation among other things, from the student and the student's writing. Lad Tobin recently explored this difficulty in his essay on the resistance he feels to reading traditionally masculine narratives written by male students wearing baseball hats. Admittedly these assumptions underlie all aspects of our teaching, from the texts we choose to our lectures and assignments, but they seem particularly problematic in the assessment of the personal essay where, in theory, things like a standard form, whether or not there is a thesis, and logical organization are gone.

The standards for assessing these essays vary, of course, depending upon which type of essay is assigned. The easiest is the preliminary autobiographical assignment, as this is easily not graded, or just given an old fashioned check or check plus. Another option is to grade the essay as part of a portfolio so that it is seen as part of a larger effort and not individually graded as a paper. Or by simply not grading these essays at all. Yet, though grades may be undesirable,

undemocratic, and politically incorrect, they do serve as motivation for many students; grades are deeply internalized. As one survey respondent wrote, the grade is what makes it a 'real' essay: "Graded these papers individually. These counted as their real papers." Perhaps this is even more poignantly demonstrated by one of my favorite episodes of *The Simpsons* in which the teachers of Springfield go on strike. Lisa, always the straight-A student, meanders around lost, performing the simpliest of tasks, such as changing the papertowel holder and begging "Grade me!"

Many instructors graded personal essays as they would any other essay, using the same criteria including clarity and, of course, grammar. One was so stunned by the responses that he graded only on grammar. Overwhelmingly, instructors graded on organization, which seems to contradict the desire for an open form. If there are no standards for organization, then how can it be the basis on which a paper is assessed? And if we are not assessing a paper on organization but depth, are we not back to the problems of ethics and the relativism of what determines the value of an experience? If we grade autobiographcial essays as exploratory, we need different criteria and these criteria need to be made clear to the students as they write the essay.

At the center of this issue, whether divided by form or ethics, is just what the aim of the first-year composition course is in the first place. Although true inquiry as defined by Zeiger is critical, it is not the form most universities acknowledge as the critical essay. Thus are we to teach such exploration, which Zeiger believes to be the root of the liberal education, or is it more pragmatic to teach the discourse of the university? Or at least of the English department? Ideally, what we want our students to gain from the first year composition course is a balance of the critical and the persuasive, which they can value because it relates to their lives. I am not advocating banishing the personal essay from the first year composition classroom. Rather, I am asking that we clarify just what the personal essay is both ourselves and to our students, that we explain how we are using it, and exactly how we intend to assess the essay, as well as how it is different and similar to the other essays we assign, so that our students can see that the personal is in everything, not isolated the autobiographcial essay.

Appdendix A

Personal Essay Survey

I'm working on a conference paper in which I explore the assignment and assessment of personal or autobiographical essays in first-year composition classes. If you could take a few minutes to fill out this survey, I would be very grateful.

1. Have you assigned an autobiographical personal essay in English 104, 105 or 109?

2. If so what was your impetus in assigning the essay? If not, why not?

3. Would you please explain, even quote, the specific assignment(s) you have given?

4. How did you assess the assignment(s)? For example, did you grade it individually or is it part of a portfolio assignment or did you not place a grade on it at all?

5. How effective do you think the assignment(s) was (were)

6. Do you think autobiographical/personal essays should be a component of the first-year composition course? Why?

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